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LONDON FOR WALLER, PARIS FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINS](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: VIOLENCE AND FIRE ERUPT AGAIN AT SEIDNAYA/SAYDNAYA
PRISON: RIOT SUSPECTED

CORRECTED COPY 000884, PARAGRAPH 3

REF: A. DAMASCUS 00482
[B](#). DAMASCUS 00517
[C](#). DAMASCUS 00814
[D](#). DAMASCUS 00883

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Eyewitnesses reported a large fire and gunshots inside Seidnaya prison on December 6. Human rights and diplomatic contacts have confirmed the accounts, though no casualty details are known. Embassy contacts surmise the violence pointed to another riot in the prison. Other contacts verified that security around the prison had increased since the incident and that a section of the prison had been damaged and was under repair. END SUMMARY.

Report on Events and Subsequent Damages

[1](#)2. (C) Catherine al-Talli (strictly protect) from the Syrian Organization for Human Rights (SWASIAH) told us December 11, eyewitnesses affiliated with SWASIAH contacted her to report a fire at the prison--reportedly larger than the previous fire from the July 5 riots--burning unchecked for an hour and a half. During that period, the eyewitnesses reported repeated gunfire coming from inside the prison. Al-Talli believed, and other diplomatic contacts concurred, the gunfire signified a new riot in the prison. Around 1230, al-Talli said, a fire truck and military transport vehicles full of soldiers arrived on the scene in an effort to control the situation. One diplomatic contact told us that she had learned there were roughly 10 military transports in total. At present we have no information on numbers or identities of the injured and/or dead, nor do we know concretely what caused the fire and provoked the shooting.

[1](#)3. (S/NF) Post's Defense Attach Office (DAO) traveled near the Seidnaya prison on December 13 and observed guard levels at the front gate had quadrupled (from four to roughly 16 men). The southern wing of the prison, where Sunni Islamist extremists are sequestered, showed signs of fire damage. A trash chute had been set up on the roof, apparently to remove debris from the roof or interior of the building; and a large boom-crane had been erected, seemingly for the purpose of construction and/or repair. Additionally, an unusually high number of vehicles, possibly military cargo vehicles, were also present in the parking area. At least 30 personnel in Syrian military uniforms were observed traveling in cargo vehicles from a nearby garrison in the vicinity of the prison.

SARG's Lessons Learned

[1](#)4. (C) During the July 5 riots, prisoners commandeered cell

phones from the guards and phoned in events to news outlets like Al-Jazeera and to Human Rights Watch as they unfolded. Since then, the SARG has blocked cell phone coverage in the prison and in the immediate vicinity. To Post's knowledge, no news outlets, either inside or outside the country, have covered the story. Human Rights Watch is, however, aware of the event, according to al-Talli.

15. (C) The SARG also took immediate steps to determine whether human rights organizers might have caught wind of the event and leaked it to outside parties. Al-Talli believes security services monitored phone calls among human rights activists in the wake of the situation based on the following experience. After the SWASIAH eyewitnesses informed al-Talli of what had happened, she called Muhanad al-Hasani, a human rights lawyer and president of SWASIAH, to set up a meeting for December 7 at 0700. No information about Seidnaya passed between the two, only that there would be an early morning meeting at al-Hasani's office. When al-Hasani arrived at his office at 0645 on December 7, eight Mukhabarat were standing outside his office (Note: this happened during the Eid al-Adha when most businesses are closed and the streets, especially early in the morning, are relatively deserted). Al-Hasani entered without difficulty, but immediately contacted al-Talli to cancel the meeting. Al-Talli stated that al-Hasani never spoke to the men, but that they were clearly on hand to send a message of intimidation, which al-Talli and al-Hasani interpreted as "keep quiet."

16. (C) SWASIAH, after reaching out to us and our like-minded European colleagues on this story, has since contacted European diplomats and asked them not to speak of the incident in public, according to a diplomatic contact. The diplomat surmised SWASIAH was put under intense pressure in the days following the events.

17. (C) COMMENT: Some observers speculate this incident may point toward an escalation in SARG-Sunni tensions as manifested in a series of counter terrorist actions by the security services against Fatah al-Islam after the group allegedly launched a car-bomb attack on September 27 against SARG military installations in Damascus (refs C & D). Others suggest that prisoners may be reacting to increasingly harsh conditions and treatment. While we don't know whether and how the SARG ended this latest episode of prison violence, the SARG's determination to prevent information from reaching the public suggests a heightened SARG sensitivity to its own vulnerabilities and inability to control the inmates. END COMMENT.

CONNELLY